

## **Pedagogical intersubjectivity, autism and education: Can teachers teach so that autistic pupils learn?**

Effective pedagogy and inclusive practice is located within the quality of learning relationships and the context-sensitive, moment-to-moment professional judgements made by teachers within learning interactions. In particular, good teachers are able to align themselves with pupils' subject positions, though this experience of relatedness within learning interactions is a bodily one that is mundane and mostly overlooked. The aim of this article is to explore whether this account of learning, that crucially involves a shared way of being minded, is adequate to describe the learning of pupils on the autism spectrum. Problems with the idea of 'pedagogical intersubjectivity' in relation to autism are noted. Using personal accounts of learning interactions and recent micro-level research findings about the competences of autistic children in favourable interactional ecologies, it is argued however that experiences of relatedness in learning should be considered as important for autistic pupils too. It is concluded that a key aspect of good practice in relation to autism and education is that teachers are able to critically reflect on their bodily experiences of interaction with autistic pupils as a way of deepening their understanding and developing their professional practice.

Keywords: autism; pedagogical intersubjectivity; experiential body; teacher understanding

### **Introduction**

Can teachers teach so that pupils on the autism spectrum can learn? The relevance of this question is brought into focus by current theorising about what constitutes effective pedagogy and inclusive practice within education. Notably, this prioritises context-sensitive professional judgements by teachers in classrooms and the importance of teachers' 'practical wisdom' in supporting pupils' learning (Corke and Carr 2014). Effective pedagogy is increasingly located within the relational, dialogical and unfolding space that exists between teachers and their pupils, with 'good teaching' seen as a moral enterprise that rests on teachers' values and the moment-to-moment decisions they make within learning interactions (Florian and Graham 2014). This is a far cry, however, from ideas about educational practice and autistic pupils. Autism education is dominated by a techno-rationalist approach that

conceptualizes teaching as the delivery of pre-packaged programmes overseen by researchers who operate outside of school settings, and learning as a straightforward transmission of pre-existing knowledge (Guldberg 2016). The dominance of this approach to the education of pupils on the autism spectrum has probably developed out of the belief that this particular group cannot learn in the way that other pupils learn, but is this really the case?

This article aims to explore whether what educationalists understand as good teaching exists for autistic pupils too. The trend within inclusive education has been away from deficit discourses and deterministic beliefs about what pupils can do and towards focusing on equitable practices that ensure the participation of all (Hart and Drummond 2013). From this perspective, the labels that children and young people receive are seen as somewhat arbitrary and of less importance than the attributes of learning environments and opportunities for participation that exist therein. Inclusive practice and effective pedagogy are seen as similarly rooted in the quality of learning relationships experienced by teachers and pupils. Though these relationships are usually unremarkable in nature, nevertheless they are seen as foundational to transformation within knowledge and 'deep learning' for a pupil (Carr 2011).

Learning relationships, like all relationships, are experienced phenomenologically, through peoples' bodies, making the process of learning and teaching, above all, one of relatedness. The experience of relatedness within interactions goes to the heart of what autism means in society today and, it is argued here, prompts extra consideration of its significance for autistic pupils in educational settings. Theorising about the experience of relatedness within learning has focused on an equivalence of subject positions that crucially supports the teacher's capacity to understand, engage with and extend pupil learning. Bateman (2013) has described this as 'pedagogical intersubjectivity' and set out here is an exploration of the accomplishment of pedagogical intersubjectivity by teachers and pupils with reference to specific practices and processes. Pedagogical intersubjectivity highlights learning and teaching as essentially a social process and problems with this as an account of autistic pupils' learning will be noted, but it will be argued that an essentialist view of learning and teaching in relation to this group of pupils is also problematic. Where favourable interactional ecologies exist, that is, where autistic ways of being and doing are

properly recognized and respected, autistic children often show competences they are not thought to have. Using information from personal accounts of moments of interpersonal understanding and feelings of ‘being known’ provided by autistic individuals, together with recent research findings gained from micro-level investigation of interactions between adults and children with autism, it will be argued that pedagogical intersubjectivity should be seen as the purpose of education for autistic pupils too, albeit one that may be harder to achieve.

### **Learning relationships, teachers’ bodies and moral practice in education**

Current theorising about inclusive educational practice notes the existence of large variation in the degree to which pupils experience inclusion, even within one school setting (Florian and Graham 2014). Inclusion is conceptualized as located in the capacity of teachers to recognize and respond effectively to the differences between learners, adapting everyday practice in ways that show respect for pupil diversity (Thomas 2013). Teachers are seen as more or less able to do this, with pupils in adjoining classrooms potentially experiencing quite different learning relationships with their respective teachers, though always with the possibility of individual development and change in this. Inclusive practices are seen as part of good teaching, where deterministic beliefs about pupils’ abilities and specialist interventions to support them are of less concern to teachers, who seek to develop rich contexts for learning that support the participation of all learners (Hart and Drummond 2013).

The way in which teachers engage in inclusive practices, however, is seen as very ordinary in nature, involving mundane, spontaneous and unremarkable classroom interactions. Inclusive practice is associated with the professional knowledge that teachers acquire over time through their practical experiences and use in their everyday practice, and is sometimes described as ‘craft knowledge’. May (2005) contends that teachers’ craft knowledge is tacit and so difficult to articulate in words and mostly overlooked in research, but nevertheless the source which teachers draw upon when faced with the complexities of the classroom. Teachers’ craft knowledge is a strong influence on learning relationships and is associated with an orientation towards the individual pupil and in depth knowledge of their personal circumstances,

interests, history and family lives. This knowledge supports the skillfulness of what teachers do within learning interactions as well as their reflections on their practice, though it is experienced by them as something that occurs automatically or intuitively.

More recent theorising has employed Aristotle's concept of 'practical wisdom' to describe what good teachers do and this also serves to emphasise the unstated, embodied and relational nature of teaching (Corke and Carr 2014). Practical wisdom in education refers to the ordinary actions teachers take when teaching – the 'doing' of teaching – together with their reflection on this, which informs further actions. Good teachers continually act and reflect, a process that is underpinned by a personal sense of responsibility and care towards the learner and disposition towards including all learners, but also by the confidence to take a more critical stance on the current situation (the status quo). As Florian and others suggest (Florian and Graham 2014, Florian and Spratt 2013), inclusion is *enacted* by teachers, who adopt a mental and physical orientation towards the pupil and choose to inhabit a potentially transformative 'relational space' with them. This relational space holds the possibility of superseding any pre-existing template for teacher-pupil interactions, if this seems appropriate to the experience of relatedness in the here and now. Importantly, it is a space that is defined by a desire on the part of the teacher to 'perceive more' about learning contexts and the ways in which a pupil engages with these, and by a non-judgemental openness by teachers to what pupils know and can do (Florian and Graham 2014).

The idea of teachers enacting inclusion draws attention to the fact that teaching is a body-based endeavour that is ultimately moral in nature. In writing about the bodies of teachers, Campbell (2009) notes that it is important to think in terms of two types of body: the institutionalized, exterior body of teachers and the experiential body of everyday teaching practice. She argues that each involves different ways of knowing others, though it is the former that is most often written about in relation to education. The latter, however, the experiential body, shapes much of what teachers know and do in everyday practice and is what gives teaching its highly personal dimension. Teachers experience learning interactions with pupils phenomenologically, through their bodies, and try to orient and attend to them in physical and practical ways. As Campbell notes, the experiential body is partly shaped by personal values, beliefs,

understandings and roles, and so does not exist outside of language and thought. However, the experiential body within pedagogy also involves immediate perceptions and continual efforts to apprehend learner subject positions. Biesta (2010) powerfully argues that it is this act of close attention to pupils by teachers, and their waiting for pupil responses within learning interactions, that makes education a moral practice. Morality, as defined by Biesta, is based in the individual's continual efforts to truly engage with other people, to see their humanity and recognize them as fully moral subjects who have agency and can act in unexpected ways. According to Biesta, education is not a reductionist construction of other people, for example, as a set of traits that must be engaged with in a pre-existing manner, since this is a denial of them as fellow human beings. Education as moral practice is more of a 'risky' enterprise based in relationships that are essentially open-ended. Learning and teaching unfolds 'weakly' and planned for outcomes can never be assured, but there is always the possibility of real transformation taking place in the pupil, and in the teacher. To believe otherwise and view educational relationships as able to deliver learning outcomes exactly as planned is to engage in 'magical thinking' about what goes on between people (Biesta 2013).

Magical thinking seems a particularly apt description for ideas about the education of autistic pupils, which often conceptualise teachers delivering programmes of learning as if they are administering a pill. A fuller consideration of ethics in relation to the education of this particular group of pupils is surely well overdue at this point in time too. More will be said about the nature of learning relationships for pupils on the spectrum, but first I will examine further this issue of the actions teachers take to support pupil learning.

### **Pedagogical intersubjectivity and pupil attainment**

The experiential body in teaching is invoked within conceptualizations of effective pedagogy and inclusive practice, but also in sociocultural theories of learning. These view knowledge and learning as situated in nature and based in relationships between the individual and their environment, which includes other people (Gee 2008). A central tenet of these theories is that teachers continually ask themselves pedagogical

questions, knowing that they must proceed cautiously in what they do. As Bateman (2015) points out in writing about the co-production of knowledge in education, the sorts of pedagogical questions teachers ask themselves include, when do I listen to pupils and how do I respond to them? What actions should I take and when? What is significant in this pupil's interest and concerns and how do I extend these?

Educational research indicates that what is required to gain answers to these kinds of questions is the experiential alignment of teacher and pupil that has been described above. For example, longitudinal research into effective pedagogy in early years education, carried out through the Effective Provision for Pre-School Education (EPPE) project (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002), identified the experience of 'sustained shared thinking' and teachers and pupils 'working together in an intellectual way' as a key factor in pupil attainment. Sustained shared thinking refers to the discernment by the teacher of the cognitive, social and cultural perspective of the learner and engagement with this, and was found to occur as the result of advanced planning, but also spontaneously and in unexpected ways. Didactic teaching methods were found to be largely unhelpful in fostering this type of experience, with child-initiated interactions, open-ended questioning and responsive teaching within emotionally warm learning relationships identified as much more important (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva 2004). The authors of this research point out that effective pedagogy requires the teacher to work flexibly and move between monitoring, discussing, directing, instructing and listening to pupils, but that openness to what the pupil knows and is capable of knowing is at the heart of good practice.

Articulating cognitive processes of learning is understandably difficult and education theorists have employed a variety of terms to describe its interpersonal dimensions. Terms such as subject equivalence (Dunphy 2005), dialogical spaces (Carr and Lee 2012), connection to student consciousness (Hart and Drummond 2013), and cultural alignments (Fleer 2015) all capture facets of how this experience of learning and teaching is thought about. 'Pedagogical intersubjectivity' is a term used by Bateman (2013) and Bateman and Waters (2013) to describe the way in which learning interactions involve teachers and pupils trying to coordinate themselves practically within interactional turns and so accommodate different levels of knowledge and maximize shared understanding. What is argued by these authors is that pedagogical intersubjectivity concerns less a full and thorough 'mental' knowing of the other and

more a demonstrable and public understanding of the other produced through interaction. Thus, though teachers sometimes inhabit powerful interactional positions where they assert a superiority or asymmetry of knowledge in order to scaffold pupil learning, good teachers are also able to adopt positions of less power and more symmetrical knowledge with pupils when necessary. They engage in conversations with pupils where they do not claim the right to know something, but offer only an opinion or next-best guess. This is as a way of placing value on what pupils bring to learning interactions, allowing pupil authorship within conversations and so supporting their agency within learning, all of which together support 'deep learning' in the pupil (Carr 2011). Symmetrical learning interactions are characterized by the fact that claims to knowledge are open for negotiation and are often marked by the briefness of their duration. Children are active as participants and clarity between interactive partners will be a primary purpose of communication. Knowledge in symmetrical learning interactions exists as distributed knowledge so that there is alignment of perceived affordances or possible actions within the same environment, teachers seeking to support pupils to transform these into fruitful actions (Gee 2008).

### **Autism and intersubjective experience**

Problems with an account of learning as a social process that requires the achievement of interactional alignment are, no doubt, apparent in relation to autistic pupils' learning. Autism is conceptualized as a sensory-based subjectivity that is less social in nature and contributes to the production of private meanings that are not easily accessed through a 'shared way of being minded' (McGeer 2009). Writing about the transactional nature of disablement in autism, Milton (2016) argues that different dispositional outlooks exist for autistic people and neurotypical people, and give rise to the perception of highly contrasting affordances, on one side imbued with more sensory meaning and on the other more with social meaning. As the well-known autistic writer and animal behaviourist, Temple Grandin, has written, different subjective positions exist so that, 'autistic people don't see their *ideas* of things; they see the actual things themselves', whilst neurotypicals 'blur all those details together into their general concept of the world' (Grandin and Johnson 2005: 30). Having autism means a way of being in the world that is not readily understood by

neurotypical others, or indeed by other people with autism (Hacking 2009, Sinclair 2010). Milton (2012) comments that this difference gives rise to a ‘double empathy problem’ that means subject positions cannot necessarily be reversed. He argues that interactional goals need to be more modest than this and that neurotypical partners need to adopt a more critical stance towards the ‘norm’ of their own subject position.

This returns us then to the question posed at the outset of this discussion. If practical wisdom and pedagogical intersubjectivity are what crucially support good teaching and inclusive practices, are teachers able therefore to teach pupils on the spectrum, whose subjectivity is not easily shared? It is certainly the case that educational research shows teachers lack confidence in terms of what they bring to the education of autistic pupils (Ochs et al. 2001, Humphrey and Symes 2013). It is also the case that many autistic people testify to the barriers they faced when trying to access learning in this way. Autobiographical accounts provide innumerable descriptions of individuals feeling shut out from learning relationships within school settings and of having to fall back on working things out about the world for themselves.

But what testaments of autistic people also tell us is that social and cultural alignment, such as the sharing of perceptions of environmental affordances, symmetries of knowledge within interactions and experiences of warmth in relationships – in other words, experiences that support pedagogical intersubjectivity – are features of relationships with *some* people. Kamran Nazeer (2006), in his beautifully written book, *Send in the Idiots*, provides an example of his agency within a dialogic relationship that leads to learning. He recalls a time as a child when he learned from a neighbour who had taken him for a walk what indicator lights on cars signify. He had noticed that the neighbour seemed to know when to cross the street, even when the traffic light indicated ‘Don’t walk’. Eventually he asked her about this and describes how she took time to explain to him how drivers use car indicator lights to communicate their intentions to others. ‘Suddenly’, remarks Nazeer, ‘I could read, almost as well as her, the minds of New York drivers’ (page 73). In a similar vein, Jen Birch (2003) describes the shared understandings she experienced as a young girl with her Grandma, who lived on the farm where she grew up. In particular, she describes their shared perception of affordances within the small world play they carried out together, notably a game called ‘Farm’ which Birch really enjoyed and



which she and her Grandma played regularly together. In the game, Birch created a lifelike model of her home farm and used this to reenact the daily routines of the farm animals, with her Grandma perfectly attuned to what she was doing in play: ‘At the moment of [me] turning on the milking machines, Grandma was in charge: she supplied the appropriate sound effects, “Choof, choof, choof, choof”, as each cow was milked’ (page 15). From Birch’s writing, it appears that these experiences of shared purpose in play and of alignment in thought and action gave her an experience of well-being that some have argued is of intrinsic value to children’s learning and development (Goodley and Runswick-Cole 2010).

Other writers describe similar experiences of relatedness to their teachers that supported their ability to participate in learning. Daniel Tammet (2006) recalls his first teacher in school, Mrs Lemon, whose name held sensory appeal for him and who he remembers as being encouraging and supportive despite his difficulty in adapting to the new school environment. Similarly, Dawn Prince-Hughes (2004) describes her fifth grade teacher, Kay Eckiss, as someone who ‘seemed to understand my problems’. Prince-Hughes writes that Kay was someone who valued her ideas and treated her with respect, who allowed her to learn at her own pace and encouraged her to do activities that were just right for her. Prince-Hughes comments of her teacher:

The times when she did disagree with me, she gave me *reasons*. Logical and well-thought-out ones. This separated her from almost everyone else I had ever known. She made me want to understand. I started to feel like there might be a chance for me not to be alone. (Prince-Hughes 2004: 47)

Descriptions such as these serve to underline the fact that people probably have different dispositional outlooks on their experiences of others in interaction, that is, how they bodily sense, think about and make sense of others. In relation to disability, Campbell (2009) cautions us to resist the impulse of thinking in terms of ‘classes of bodies’ since this might not make sufficient allowance for the variation that exists in terms of people’s outlook on interaction. Billington (2016), writing about human consciousness in the existential presence of another person, similarly makes the point that the quality of human relationships, including those between people who are autistics and people who are neurotypical, is not reducible to what is known about someone’s label, but is implicated in a much more complex juncture of time and

space. Recent micro-level investigation of interactions between adults and autistic children supports this since it shows how interactions are contingent on moment-by-moment decisions about action, which are different for different people, and this is what I shall turn to next.

### **Autistic sociality and features of favourable interactional ecologies**

Although there is clear recognition that children with autism develop, the strong focus on pupil deficits in education has meant that we have little understanding of the expression, articulation, meaning making, practice and concept formation involved in the learning activity of autistic pupils (Solomon 2013). It is also the case that, though many approaches in autism education involve teachers developing their competences, for example in providing simplified instruction, clear communication and visual supports, this is usually with the goal of enabling autistic pupils to engage in social processes that retain strong expectations of non-autistic social features, for example, back and forth conversation and collaborative working practices. Investigations of interactional ecologies where children with autism are supported to engage more fully describe other types of interactional features. These include non-face to face interactions, warm but restrained emotion, the mediation of interaction through writing or objects, and the operation of different understandings about personal space and what constitutes a comfortable human environment (Ochs and Solomon 2010). The importance of extended listening to another person talk about their special interests, without the expectation that it will be a reciprocal exchange, and the privileging of objective knowledge over knowledge gained from taking another person's point of view are further features of a healthy interactional ecology (Bagatell 2010, Ochs et al. 2004). Findings such as these underline the fact that autistic people operate in the social world in differential ways that are nevertheless patterned and contribute to the idea of an 'autistic sociality' (Ochs and Solomon 2010). In relation to learning and development, the idea of an autistic form of sociality undermines the legitimacy of normative discourses and supports the need for self-advocacy and respect for difference.

Recent research into the phenomenological experience of interaction for autistic

children shows us that making assumptions about children's capacities in communication can be misguided. Analysis of micro-moments of naturally-occurring interaction provides evidence of autistic children trying to make sense of social situations and demonstrating agency in social participation, but in ways that are easily missed, 'glossed over' and misinterpreted (Solomon 2015, Sterponi et al. 2015). Features of language and communication may be recognizably different to neurotypical interaction, for example, echolalia used to convey meaning and gaze directed at the body not the face, but nevertheless serve an important communicative function (Stribling et al. 2007, Tuononen et al. 2014). Research carried out in classrooms shows that where a teacher is able to allow a pupil to lead in interaction, they can demonstrate dialogic competences not often associated with autism, for example, repeated talk used to accomplish a repair in conversation or to share the emotional meaning of what has been said (Korkiakangas et al. 2012). Research provides evidence too of children reflecting on social experience and adjusting their behaviour accordingly, albeit in ways that may be less sophisticated than neurotypical others and produce less successful outcomes in terms of social interaction (Ochs 2015).

Importantly, what such research shows us is that degrees of sociality are not accurately defined as belonging to the individual, but are more precisely described as a product of social processes, with greater amounts of sociality possible where the child's interactional ecology is favourable (Solomon 2015). In studies of autistic children's conversations with family members at home and with teachers at school, it is evident that structures that give rise to more meaningful interaction include the use of simple language and longer response times, the operation of equal rights between communication partners, and non-verbal or repeated communication recognized as a legitimate turn (Dickerson et al., 2007, Maynard et al. 2016). Recognising the child as a psychological agent, treating their utterances as meaningful even in situations of uncertainty and having the confidence to follow their lead in conversation are further important identified features of a healthy ecology (Geils and Knoetze 2008). Though this micro-level approach to research is in its early stages, findings such as these reflect what we already know from accounts provided by people with autism. These testify to the individual with autism acting with agency though not always with good outcomes, wanting to participate but not being sure how, or going about interaction in

idiosyncratic ways that may or may not be successful (Prince-Hughes 2004, Robison 2007).

Consideration of autistic ways of doing and being, and respect for these, are hugely important when we come to think about inclusive education for autistic pupils. Inclusive pedagogy is founded on non-discriminatory practices that are experienced by pupils as consistent, non-threatening and ultimately supportive (Thomas 2013). Educational standards are raised where pupils are not judged against each other and where individual difference is recognized and respected. Teacher engagement with autistic sociality and capacity for some degree of interactional alignment must surely be seen as underpinning inclusive pedagogy in relation to pupils on the spectrum. Common sense tells us that autistic pupils – like all learners – will function best where they feel safe, experience reduced stress and feel supported. Autistic adults continually testify to the stress of masking their autistic selves and ‘pretending to be normal’ (Bertilsson Rosqvist 2012), and such a situation must be seen as the antithesis of a supportive learning environment. Supportive learning relationships, that allow the pupil to feel adequately ‘seen’ and understood, must be viewed as critical to this and this is what I shall consider in my final comments.

## **Teacher understanding and autism**

Reviews of educational approaches have highlighted teacher understanding of autism as a key factor in best practice (Jones et al. 2009, Parsons et al. 2011). However, this glosses over the complexity of what understanding is as a state of mind is, specifically that it is a process rather than a straightforwardly realized once and for all position. Much has been written in recent years about the types of professional knowledge teacher understanding is based on, with discussion around the extent to which this is intuitive, technical or theoretical knowledge (Winch et al. 2015). What is clear, however, is that the type of body-based knowledge under discussion here, one that is gained within experiences of everyday interaction, requires critical reflection in order for the individual to achieve proper awareness and gain a deeper level of understanding.

Given this importance of teacher understanding to good practice, much is made too of the need for teaching training in the literature on autism and education. However, the fact that understanding is a process, and that reflection is an integral part of this process, raises questions about the nature of training and militates against the idea of an 'expert' or 'transplant' model of knowledge exchange (Cunningham and Davis 1985). Equally, it emphasises the need for the development of tools for reflection that are adequately powerful to support proper consideration of the non-fixed, responsive, unfolding position of the experiential body within interaction. Education theory suggests that these tools need to be 'open and creative' (Heron and Reason 2013), and could therefore take the form of diary entries, talk in relation to open-ended questions, and consideration of case studies and recorded moments of interaction. Critical reflection needs to be on interactive processes of teaching and learning, rather than individual psychology, and should not seek to separate out pupil cognition from the social and affective environment in which it occurs. Intersubjectivity for pedagogical purposes should be viewed, not as some sort of engagement with hidden away mental processes, but more as an ordinary and practical accomplishment that is achieved through successful coordination within interactional turns (Porter and Edwards 2013). Always of importance is the fact that reflection is itself a socially constructed practice that is value-laden, culturally mediated and, of necessity, on-going.

What is of concern is that the dominance of deficit-discourses of autism and rigid forms of intervention in autism educational practice could be seen as a barrier to this kind of reflection. Deficit-based approaches to education, that view the individual in terms of a 'norm', detract from the immediacy of human experience and help to create dehumanized 'thin people', as Hacking (2009) has argued. In addition, such approaches perpetuate negative views of autism that possibly provide a powerful influence on the experiential body within interaction. Deficit discourses of autism may serve to reduce the capacity of teachers to be open to their autistic pupils and what they bring to learning interactions. They may inhibit the teacher from attempting to 'perceive more' about learning contexts and how individual pupils participate in these. Importantly, the perceived need within autism research of expertise to reside outside of schools (Pellicano 2014), that is also constituent of deficit-based teaching, undermines teacher confidence in their professional judgement and ability to take a critical stance on their interactional experiences. The nature of teaching means that

practitioners will always take a personal view of actual learning contexts, but the separation of theory and practice that currently exists for pupils on the spectrum means that this important part of what good teachers do remains worryingly overlooked and theoretically unconceptualised.

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